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Author and Audience.

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The relationship between audience and story-teller can be the most dynamic factor in composition by young people. However, the child must know that his creative endeavors will be presented to an audience which is favorably disposed toward him and which will offer only appreciative constructive criticism. Through noting the responses of his audience to his story-telling, the child learns to manipulate narrative techniques for the best effect. In addition to varying the presentation, he will often alter the direction of the narrative in anticipation of the audience's response. When he himself is a part of the audience, the child learns by comparing his reactions to those of other students. With this favorable audience rapport, the child is free to experiment with new techniques of narrative composition and is able to take satisfaction in his achievements. (LH)

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AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE

Dorothy O. Saunders

The axis of author and audience is familiar to everyone interested in composition and yet, as is so often the case with the familiar it is frequently overlooked, underestimated and disused. There is much written and said about the quality of writing, about the mechanics, about motivation, but surprisingly little attention is accorded this all important axis upon which every piece of composition must swing. Especially for the young child, whose attitudes towards writing are being shaped, this relationship, can be the most dynamic and statisfying factor in the whole process of composition. Within it lies the potentials for motivation, inspiration and reward.

The importance of audience to author is not a new or even a modern concept. Edward P. Corbett in an essay, "A New Look at Old Rhetoric" points out that "The most valuable lesson it (the new rhetoric) can learn is Aristotle's insistence that the audience is the chief informing principle in any kind of communicative discourse."[1] To apply the teaching of the great Athenian to the writing of elementary school children may seem incongruous but the lesson is particularly cogent to the early years when children are finding their way to adequate writing techniques. Certainly teachers need to be especially sensitive to the author-audience relationship and its energizing, sheltering power.

The very young child participating in a "show and share" situation or telling a story feels little responsibility to his audience. In an almost narcissistic delight he shows his butterfly or spins his small story, pleased to be in the spot-light and often so entranced with the experience that he can scarcely find a stopping place. As the audience begins to respond, he becomes conscious of it and is changed by his awareness.

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1. Edward P. J. Corbett. "A New Look at Old Rhetoric" Rhetoric National Council of Teachers of English 1967, 16

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Thus a first grader may solicit the attention of his group: "Look at the brown bump on this leaf." "See how this works." Or as he tells a tale, he watches the faces before him, seeking--although perhaps, on a less than conscious level--their reactions.

The mere existence of an audience is often reason enough for story telling. Recently I had the joy of observing a first grade group in a story telling period. When one child had spun a tale about a lost rabbit and then listened with beaming face while the others told him everything they liked about his story, small Donna could hardly wait to volunteer the next one. Apparently the teacher shared my sense that it was the interaction of author and audience which appealed to Donna and not any specific story burning to be told, for she asked gently, "What will your story be about?"

"Oh--ah--a hen," was the reply and then Donna began

> Once there was a mother hen. She was sitting on her three eggs and she sat and she sat and she **sat**. And one day, crack, crack, crack, the three eggs hatched open and out cam....

At this point she paused dramatically, and watching the children suddenly shouted,"...KITTENS!" It was quite obvious that this idea had just come to her but the gasp from the audience immediately certified the success of her invention.

> Now the mother hen was certainly surprised because nothing like that had ever happened in her family before, not ever. So she pushed the kittens out of the nest....

This brought a little murmur from the group and a pause in the story which then quickly accommodated the audience reaction.

> ...but they mewed and mewed so she got a friendly neighbor cat to take care of them. And she went to Florida by herself.

This tale came into being only because there was an audience. The children were delighted, marvelled at the miraculous eggs, praised Donna

for thinking of the neighbor cat, agreed that the Florida trip was necessary therapy. You may be sure Donna promised lots more stories while half a dozen children were already waving their hands before the teacher could ask who would like to tell the next story. Here was an author-audience relationship so beguiling that no other motivation for story telling was necessary. Not all the tales were as enchanting as Donna's but every one was awarded the attention of the group and praised for whatever the children enjoyed.

That this was such a gratifying experience for Donna and her classmates was due in large measure to the spirit and response of the audience. An audience is not just a collection of bodies; it is a group brought together specifically to listen and react to what is presented. Each is marked by its special temper and attitude toward the presentation. Adult performers offering the same program to two audiences may identify one as warm and responsive, the other as cold and withdrawn. They readily admit that the latter type reduces their effectiveness and is hard to shrug off.

For a child, the importance of a warmly receptive audience cannot be overstated. If a group is allowed to criticize, to point out weaknesses, or tear apart an offering, the result can only be a paralyzing reluctance, not only on the part of the unfortunate author, but also on the part of any member of the group intelligent enough to figure out that he does not want to run the risk of similar treatment. The kind of audience a child needs--and deserves--will not simply materialize; it must be consciously developed. First it must be clearly understood that the group is gathered to enjoy--not to judge--what is offered. The stage for a story reading time is set in eager anticipation of a delightful experience. "Story time is just like a Christmas stocking," a third grader told me, "You just never know what you'll pull out next." Her analogy is apt since each story <u>is</u> a special sort of gift, the child's own unique invention. All negative or reforming criticism is unsuitable and a pattern of appreciative comment is firmly established and maintained. A factor in preserving this pattern is the empathy which exists between author and audience, for the roles change, and members of the audience can readily recall their own efforts and their pleasure in the gracious reception of them. Appreciation, not evaluation is the hallmark of a good audience.

With the assurance that whatever he writes will be warmly received, a child can safely embark on a venture of composition. The risks and exposure which are the inevitable accompaniment of any enterprise, can be undertaken with a happy heart when the voyager knows that no matter what degree of success attends his venture, a safe haven waits to welcome him. A trusted audience actually sets a child free to write, tales are invented to be told to others and creation is a delight when the sure knowledge of an appreciative audience paces invention.

Rarely does a child know, when he starts a story, just how it will develop and finish. (Many adult writers admit to this state of affairs, too!) What moves his tale along is not likely to be a list of the attributes of a good story, nor yet the prospect of a teacher's grade. Neither provides much incentive for imagination. But there is evidence that the audience is a factor in the step by step unfolding of a stoty. In talking with a number of third and fourth graders about how they write, how they find ideas for the next step in a story I found that more than half their responses referred to their audience: "I know what out class likes--surprises and tricks." "I can almost hear them laughing as I write." "When I get stuck, I just figure out how the kids would like the story to end." Another group of responses compared the development of a story to that of a play; the audience seems to figure in these, too, although less specifically. The evidence of the classroom is even more telling. Often when children begin to write they are eager to share the first few lines with their teacher, usually with some happy assurance: "Wait 'til you hear this. This is really great." Others take delight in reading "a teaser" stopping just as important action is about to take place. In either case, the anticipation of audience reaction to the remainder of the story is enough to send the writer gleefully back to his pencil and paper with at least the <u>next</u> step shaping in his mind. Even elderly sixth graders enjoy reading the first part of a story to a special friend, gathering from the contact, I suspect, ideas as well as impetus. Certain

it is that where children write for a known and trusted audience, ideas flow with a gay sort of freedom not found in classrooms where the products of a writing period are read and graded by the teacher who may share later with the group those she feels have merit.

The following story is entirely Susie's own creation but it is plain that her imagination was stimulated by her knowledge of her eventual audience for she has woven into her tale many ideas she and other eight year olds enjoy.

The Silly Lion

Once there was a lion who had curlers in his mane and a baby face. One morning the lion tried to get the curlers out of his mane and he started screaming, "Ouch, ooocch, a-a-a-a, it hurts!"

So when he went for his morning walk, the monkey said to him, "Nya, Nya! Look at the baby with curlers in his hair."

And do you know what that lion did? He slapped the monkey across the face and yelled, "Listen, I am king around here." Then he went on his way and soon he met Mrs. Rabbit. And can you imagine what she said?

"What's the matter? Can't you get your curlers out?"

Well, the lion got so mad he said, "If you don't be quiet, I'll eat you."

Poor Mrs. Rabbit got so scared she started pleading, "Please, please don't eat me."

"We-ell, if I eat you I won't get my Easter basket, will I?" asked the lion.

"No, I guess you wouldn't," said Mrs. Rabbit.

> "In that case I won't eat you." And the lion did get his Easter basket with 80 chocolate candies, 67 jelly beans, 45 marshmallow bunnies, and 100 eggs. And no one ever laughed at the lion again.

How well Susie has written for her group, including many ideas which are particularly appealing to this age: the great king is humbled first by his inability to remove those ridiculous curlers and then by a small rabbit; the big creature is the laughing stock of the town while the little one is the heroine; there is a fine string of numbers and goodies, and at the end the conventional order for society is restored. Such a thoroughly satisfactory story could only be contrived by one writing not for a grade, not to meet a list of standards for story telling, but for--an audience!

It is from this ageless story-teller audience situation that the designs for literature have emerged. Through the centuries, story tellers have tried various ways of engaging and holding an audience, discarding those techniques which proved futile and developing those which brought a desired response. Unfortunately textbooks and teachers often set aside this vivid reality, substituting instead, a list of desirable characteristics: a good beginning sentence, descriptive detail, interesting conversation, etc., etc. Even the most enthusiastic presentation of these can evoke little genuine response when they are exterior to the child's own experience.

However, it is possible for children to relive for themselves the sort of activities from which these elements of story design evolved. When a child writes just for the delight of creating a story with which to entertain his classmates, he is keenly aware of their reaction when he presents his tale. He notes what stirs them, what makes them laugh, what catches their attention, what begets favorable comment. Against this natural response of an appreciative audience, he measures, as

have all story tellers, the worth of his story. These flashes of success spot light sound narrative techniques and little by little he learns what gives spirit and vigor to his tale. Of course, the elements he finds effective are just those in the sterile prescription. However, he knows their value not in terms of recommendation but in terms of genuine function. He uses descriptive detail not because a textbook says it is a quality of a good story but because he himself, has seen how his audience responds to a vivid picture, and has heard their admiration of his graphic phrases. He sets his tale in motion with is first words not because he must fit his invention into a frame resting on "a good beginning sentence", but because he is keenly aware of the importance of catching the attention of his audience quickly. His understanding--and effective use--of the techniques of story telling grow dynamically out of his desire to hold an audience and his experience in writing for one.

If what a child learned about narrative techniques depended wholly upon his experience as an author, the process would be a slow one. But for each time a child is an author, he is many, many times part of an audience, a special audience gathered in a mood of happy expectancy. It is an empathetic group as well, for who better than one who has known the joys and frustrations of story telling, can appreciate the efforts of another author?

In this setting, the listener can give himself whole heartedly to the enjoyment of the tale. When it is finished, because a pattern of appreciative comment has been firmly established, he selects those aspects which delighted him. This repeated seeking of what is good in a story, inevitably sharpens a child's perception and, in a subtle fashion,allies him with the success of what he praises. Furthermore, his own perception is deepened and fortified by the comments of others and of his teacher who may lift to the consciousness of the group some particularly appealing bit of writing or underscore----lightly!----their recognition of a fresh or vital passage. Through repeated experiences of this sort, the child becomes imbued with what makes writing effective and inevitably, this learning is reflected in his own stories.

Naturally, it is in the writing of the more creative children that effective techniques first appear. Gradually, however, they are absorbed by others. Within the secure rapport of the author-audience relationship, a child is free to experiment with a new technique or even to produce a patent imitation, knowing that his effort will be received respectfully. In time he assimilates into his own writing those elements which are appropriate for his style and the maturity of his thinking. A child learns to write by writing but he also learns--and how much--by listening.

Here are bits of four stories written by sixth graders which suggest the infinite variety of ways in which children adapt their understanding of narrative techniques of illuminate their own invention.

> Meredith J. Mottsberry went to the zoo. It was her fourth birthday and the trip was a reward. Once at the zoo, the Mottsberrys went to the monkey house, the reptile house, the snake house and the bear cages. After the Mottsberrys had seen everything, they decided they would get Meredith a titanic balloon. It was as tall as Meredith and a shade somewhere between scarlet and purple.
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> **********
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> Most squirrels are very good. Only some of them, just like people, are bad. That's what fatty was--bad. Very bad. Nobody liked Fatty; he was fat, haughty, naughty, and very proud. It was nearing winter. All the squirrels were out busily gathering nuts; even Fatty, slowly picking up visible acorns from around the

trunk of his tree. He did not even bother to look under leaves where most of the acorns were. By the time Fatty had finished he had gathered only 27 acorns. Now how could you live through a whole winter with only 27 acorns?

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"I can't see," muttered Johnny Elephant as he strutted before the reflecting wells of the mill pond, "why all the girls of this village aren't in love with me, I being such a handsome young fellow."

So saying he reached into his back pocket, brought out a red bandana and wiped his tusks. He then picked a white flower at the edge of the mill pond and put it into the lapel of his little blue jacket. Then, looking very important, he put his hands in his pockets, held his head high and strutted down the road to Suzie May's house.

Splash! He had unexpectedly landed in a mud puddle and a thin high pitched voice was giggling from the house.

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Something was wrong, terribly wrong! We were falling fast. Guages dropping. Red lights flashing. Hands flying to buttons and knobs. Push here. Pull there. No use. Down go the guages. The lights flicker--- flicker--- and go out. The scream of the falling craft drowns our yells of dismay. One hope--- only one-- the ejector button!

These excerpts are as fresh and vital--- and as different--- as the children themselves. The leisurely legato of the Meredith J. Mottsberry tale contrasts sharply with the abrupt staccato of the tale of the falling aircraft, the elaborate picture of Johnny Elephant with the lightly stroked sketch of Fatty, the squirrel. The samplings indicate that the writers know a good deal about the art of story telling, yet each has written in his own unique way for each has gathered from his experience of being sometimes an author and often a part of an eager audience, the insights suitable for his special invention.

The most important outcome of the interaction of author and audience is not, however, the quality of writing but what happens to the child himself. In an age when mechnaization and multiple pressures of time and space leave little opportunity for a child to know the satisfaction of identifying himself with his own product, to weave a tale out of one's own imagination which can hold an audience and win its warm approval is a heady and gratifying experiemce. No grade (Not even an A-plus!), no teacher's comment, could possibly produce the same deep personal satisfaction as seeing in the faces of his classmates, testimony to the success of his creation and hearing their praise of his effort. He stands before his peers, his own worth clearly certified in their appreciation of his unique invention. It is a moment of fulfillment when he knows a kinship with all creativity. It can but make him a stronger person eager for new ventures.

I wish there were time to explore more fully the author audience relationship as it affects this phase of composition and also to examine the manner in which it can give meaning to the processes of functional writing, for it is a wonderfully rich resource rarely used to anything like its full potential. Without the image of an audience, writing is scarcely more than an exercise; with it, authorship is a zestful adventure. Together author and audience form an abundantly productive whole, a timeless pattern, proved by the ages and still ready to work its magic in today's classroom.